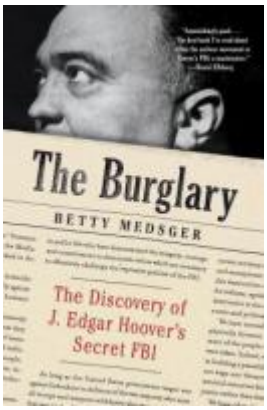
Exposing the FBI

written by Lawrence S. Wittner | December 16, 2014



Review of *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI*, by Betty Medsger (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. 596 pages. Notes, Index. Hardcover $29.95; paperback $16.95).

The Burglary tells the story of how, on March 8, 1971, in the midst of the Vietnam War, eight peace activists broke into an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, in an effort to discover whether the FBI was working, illegally, to suppress American dissent. Spiriting away all the records in the FBI office, these daring men and women soon learned that this federal crime-fighting bureau was, indeed, engaging in a broad range of unlawful activities. They photocopied some of the most revealing documents and mailed them, in the name of the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI, to members of congress and the press. After receipt of these materials, Betty Medsger, a journalist at the *Washington Post*, wrote an article published in that newspaper that sparked a public outcry.

Up to this point, the FBI was an all-powerful, highly-regarded, and highly-feared agency whose underhanded activities had always been shrouded in the utmost secrecy. But, now, an ever-widening investigation began—by journalists, by the U.S. Attorney General, and, finally, by congressional committees. The result was explosive. As the criminal behavior of the FBI was laid out for all to see, the public was appalled by FBI lawlessness, J. Edgar Hoover (its director since 1924) died in disgrace, a few top FBI officials were tried and convicted for their criminal activities, and legal and administrative reforms were put into place to prevent a recurrence of the bureau's misconduct.

With the outbreak of the scandal, Hoover and the FBI fought ferociously to hide the FBI's record and to salvage its reputation and his own. Hoover also launched a massive manhunt to identify and capture the burglars. But he failed on every count. Despite an enormous FBI effort, the burglars were never apprehended or even identified.

Now, however, more than 40 years later, Medsger has identified them. She discovered them quite accidentally when dining in Philadelphia at the home of two old friends of hers, Bonnie and John Raines, who let slip the fact that they had participated in the burglary. Medsger convinced the couple that she should tell the full story of their historic act of resistance, that they should reveal themselves publicly, and that they should help her find the other activists involved. Ultimately, she located all the burglars and all consented to be interviewed. Five of them agreed to be publicly identified. This willingness to step forward after more than four decades in hiding was facilitated by the fact that the statute of limitations on their burglary had run out in 1976.

A major virtue of the book is its revelation of vast FBI criminality. Hoover's secret FBI, as Medsger summarizes it,

> "usurped citizens' liberties . . . and used deception, disinformation, and violence as tools to

> harass, damage and . . . silence people whose opinions the director opposed. . . . Agents and informers were required to be outlaws. Blackmail and burglary were favorite tools in the secret FBI. Agents and informers were ordered to spy on—and create ongoing files on—the private lives, including the sexual activities, of the nation's highest officials and other powerful people. Electoral politics were manipulated to defeat candidates the director did not like. Even mild dissent, in the eyes of the FBI, could make an American worthy of being spied on and placed in an ongoing FBI file."

Medsger notes that "this extraordinary situation . . . thrived near the top of the federal government for nearly half a century, affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans."

The FBI's spying operations were extraordinarily extensive. All black college student organizations, for example, were placed under surveillance and infiltrated. Indeed, on some college campuses, every black student was placed under surveillance. Moreover, the FBI infiltrated the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the NAACP. In fact, NAACP officials were under continuous FBI surveillance since 1923.

COINTELPRO, only briefly mentioned in the Media files but more fully revealed in the aftermath of the Media raid, was perhaps Hoover's most ambitious program of criminal activity. Created by Hoover in 1956 to harass Communists and other radicals, COINTELPRO was updated to COINTELPRO-New Left by the FBI director in 1968. This revised model was designed to "expose, disrupt, and otherwise neutralize" the New Left Movement by any means necessary, including spreading false, derogatory information about its leaders and organizations, creating conflicts among its leaders and members, burglary, and violence. It targeted nearly all social change movements, including the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement, and the environmental movement. The FBI also secretly, and sometimes violently, attacked college campus and alternative newspapers. Medsger observes that the bureau worked at "forcing the publications to close, infiltrating them with informers, and threatening the credibility—and sometimes the lives—of their staff."

With the FBI operating almost everywhere, its records grew enormously, and eventually included 500,000 domestic intelligence files, each typically including several individuals' names. Medsger writes of Hoover:

> "No part of the government or American life was outside his reach. He used his secret power to destroy individuals and to manipulate and destroy organizations. . . . He secretly punished people he regarded as wrong-thinking—civil rights leaders, senior members of Congress who questioned war policy, and also average people who wrote letters to a member of Congress or dared to express their dissent by appearing at an antiwar demonstration. In Hoover's world . . . any American was fair game."

Not surprisingly, the FBI maintained files on nearly all well-known twentieth century writers and artists. To name a few: Sinclair Lewis, Pearl Buck, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Thomas Mann, Carl Sandburg, Truman Capote, Thornton Wilder. Lillian Hellman, Robert Frost, Graham Greene, Hannah Arendt, and Ray Bradbury. The FBI also kept files on leading publishers who, after all, had dared to publish many of these writers.

Thousands of university faculty members were spied upon and many fired from their jobs as a result of FBI activity. A 1958 study found that two-thirds of the then approximately 2,500 social science faculty members surveyed had been visited by the FBI at least once, and a third of them had been visited three or more times. At the University of California at Berkeley in 1960—years before the student rebellion erupted there—Hoover assigned FBI agents to gather derogatory information

about every one of the university's 5,365 faculty members. Staff members, even at the lowest levels, were also investigated.

Naturally, the American Civil Liberties Union was a key target of FBI surveillance, as were the conversations of the ACLU's legal staff while they prepared their cases.

Some of the practices of Hoover's FBI are almost unbelievable. For example, it planted false rumors about the race of actress Jean Seberg's unborn child, a dirty tricks operation that resulted in her nervous collapse, the death of her premature baby, and, ultimately, her own suicide.

Perhaps the best-known example of FBI viciousness occurred in connection with Martin Luther King, Jr. The FBI plot against King included office break-ins, the use of informers, mail opening, wiretapping, and the bugging of King's office, home, and hotel rooms. The FBI even attempted to convince him to commit suicide only weeks before he was to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Hoover also instructed FBI agents not to inform King about threats against his life that it had uncovered. Hoover told President Lyndon Johnson that King was "an instrument in the hands of subversive forces seeking to undermine our nation." It was King's "I Have a Dream" speech that convinced FBI officials, including Hoover, that King had to be destroyed.

Hoover was able to engage in these operations because they were kept secret, unexamined, and, for the most part, unknown even to his superiors, such as the attorney general and the president. Yes, in 1943, the U.S. Attorney General, learning of Hoover's Custodial Detention Index—a list of more than 26,000 Americans who, in the event of war or a national security emergency would be imprisoned without charges or trial—ordered Hoover to end this program. Hoover said he did so. But he simply lied. The name of the program was changed to the Security Index, and it continued, unknown to Hoover's superiors, under this new designation.

Hoover also made himself untouchable thanks to a massive FBI public relations program. As Medsger notes, "he turned himself into the go-to government man for thoughts on crime, communism, war, religion, child-rearing, and even how to make the best popovers." The material created by the FBI's public relations division "ranged from manifestos against communism to children's coloring books on crime to *Mickey Mouse Club* television episodes broadcast from the director's office to confidential tips, true and untrue, to `friendly' journalists about the personal lives of powerful people the director considered enemies of the bureau."

Another reason that Hoover remained unchallenged was that he had material in his secret files that enabled him to discourage people from getting in his way. Sometimes, he used this material to blackmail powerful individuals, including American presidents. Medsger shows that Hoover even succeeded in blackmailing President Richard Nixon.

The peace activists who raided the FBI office and exposed the agency's crimes emerge from the pages of Medsger's book as tremendously appealing. Principled, thoughtful, and committed to nonviolence, they included a professor of religion, the director of a daycare center, a cab driver, and a graduate student. William Davidon, a mild-mannered physicist at Haverford College, was the initiator of their action and their ringleader. Appalled by the Vietnam War and increasingly aware of FBI activity to suppress dissent, Davidon had approached these antiwar activists individually with the idea of breaking into an FBI office to investigate the agency's possible misconduct. Although the activists were initially shocked by his proposal, they were also courageous people, disgusted by the war and inspired by the example of the daring Catholic pacifists who had raided draft board offices and destroyed their records. None had any skills as a burglar, and all of them—if arrested at some point, which seemed likely—had a great deal to lose. Bonnie and John Raines, for example, were deeply devoted to their three young children, and the thought of leaving them behind, while

imprisoned for decades, terrified them. Nevertheless, they were determined to act.

One of the key questions Medsger asks is: How did these activists find the enormous courage necessary to undertake this very dangerous, formidable task? Part of the answer, exemplified by the recollections of one activist, lies in their belief that inaction in the face of evil represented complicity. And this sentiment, in turn, reflected the widespread perception among activists that the "good" Germans had looked the other way in the 1930s and early 1940s while fascists carried out their murderous policies. Another major factor that bolstered their courage was their participation in the civil rights movement. A number of the burglars had already risked their lives during the 1960s by confronting the violent forces of white supremacy in the South. After that they not only understood the evil that lurked in their country better than did most Americans, but had acquired the courage necessary to confront it. Finally, by 1971, the Vietnam War had generated a climate of fierce resistance, daring, self-sacrifice, and widespread civil disobedience. As John Raines recalled: "Courage was natural. It was all around you."

Even though the activists were never caught and sent to prison for their bold venture, they did not have an easy time of it in the decades after 1971. Worried that they would be arrested and incarcerated for lengthy jail terms, they continued looking nervously over their shoulders for many years. In addition, to maintain the necessary secrecy about what they had done, they agreed not to discuss this crucial event in their lives with their friends and to sever contact with one another. The ensuing sense of isolation and lack of a psychological support network weighed heavily upon them. Nevertheless, none had any regrets about the Media break-in.

In fact, their action—aside from ensuring a broad public recognition of the dangers posed by secret intelligence agencies—led to some very positive institutional changes. Appalled by Hoover's nearly 50-year stranglehold on the FBI, congress set a ten-year term limit for its director. Congress also embraced the recommendation of the U.S. Senate investigating committee, headed by Idaho Senator Frank Church, that congress establish permanent congressional oversight of the FBI, with committees to do so established in both houses. In 1978, congress passed the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which established a federal court to review applications for warrants for electronic surveillance. Although congress failed to approve a new charter for the FBI, Attorney General Edward Levi established administrative guidelines for the agency. To open a full investigation, the guidelines required the FBI to have "specific and articulable facts giving reason to believe that an individual or a group is or may be engaged in activities which involve the use of force or violence and which involve or will involve the violation of federal law." In addition, the guidelines stated that "government monitoring of individuals or groups because they hold unpopular or controversial political views is intolerable in our society." In September 1980, two top FBI officials were convicted of criminal charges for illegal break-ins.

But, thereafter, the pendulum began swinging the other way. Elected president in 1980, Ronald Reagan quickly pardoned the convicted FBI criminals. His attorney general, William French Smith, loosened the guidelines Levi had put in place. As a result, the FBI had fewer restrictions on what could prompt or continue an investigation, and the need for attorney general approval of some investigative methods was scrapped. In 1981, the FBI opened a five-year investigation of individuals and groups opposing Reagan's policy toward Central America. It included widespread use of informers at political meetings; break-ins at churches, members' homes, and organizations' offices; and surveillance of hundreds of peace demonstrations. Among the groups targeted were the National Council of Churches, the Maryknoll Sisters of the Roman Catholic Church, the United Auto Workers, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador.

After the attacks of 9/11, the FBI slipped back rapidly toward the Hoover practices. The bureau

placed organizations under investigation because they opposed the war in Iraq, including the Catholic Worker movement and the American Friends Service Committee. Also, of course, under the Patriot Act and the further loosening of administrative guidelines, the FBI is but one of seventeen U.S. intelligence agencies sharing intelligence data gathered in the United States and around the world by the NSA. Medsger notes: "That information about millions of Americans . . . sits there, available as Hoover's secret files were, for potential abusive use at any time." Meanwhile, the FISA Court became a rubber stamp for the intelligence agencies.

Medsger's book not only provides a useful description of the FBI's repressive practices, but is a gripping thriller. Although there are no murders, car chases, or desperate, hand-to-hand battles in it, the story is an intense, nail-biting one. On numerous occasions, the activists experienced un-nerving situations, as well as narrow escapes from discovery and imprisonment. Medsger has a great story to tell here, and—as befits a longtime journalist and former chair of the Journalism Department of San Francisco State University—she tells it very well. Furthermore, *The Burglary* is a meticulously-researched book, grounded in interviews with the activists and government officials (some of them from the FBI), the 33,698-page official record of the FBI's investigation of the Media burglary, a broad range of other FBI documents, and important published studies of the FBI.

Of course, *The Burglary* has particular relevance for the left. After all, the FBI's police state tactics were directed largely at social change activists and organizations, and certainly played some role in limiting their success and, occasionally, in destroying them. In turn, most peace and social justice activists have learned from bitter experience that civil liberties are vital to social progress. It was no accident that the Media burglars came out of the peace and civil rights movements, or that the American Civil Liberties Union was launched by antiwar radicals in response to the U.S. government repression of socialists, anarchists, pacifists, and other dissenters during World War I. As the guardians of privilege and their opponents both understand, if a better world is ever to come to birth, freedom of political expression will be necessary.

Lawrence S. Wittner, Professor of History emeritus at SUNY/Albany, has written widely on peace movements and foreign policy. His latest book is *What's Going On at UAardvark?* (2013), a satirical novel about university corporatization and rebellion.